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ABSTRACT

An institute in oral proficiency and teaching effectiveness for practicing secondary Spanish and French teachers is described. The spoken language classes of the institute took place daily, 4 hours per day for 4 weeks, using a modified Foreign Service Institute (FSI) method of small group instruction. Native speaker tutors were used who were trained to teach the language orally and to serve as experts. A linguist was available for questions about the phonology, syntax, grammar, or other aspect of the language. Classes focused on pronunciation, including phonemes and intonation; individual and dialect differences; everyday expressions; question asking and answering; simulations; study of syntax, word choice, and meanings; and appropriateness of style. FSI texts were used along with other materials, and Spanish language films and social events supplemented the instruction. Results of pre- and post-Institute oral proficiency interview/evaluations showed positive changes for all participants. Their improvement in a 4-week intensive program demonstrated the feasibility and appropriateness of such training for modern language teachers. (LB)

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IMPROVING ORAL SKILLS FOR IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Improving Oral Skills For In-Service Teachers

Introduction

There have always been teachers who were convinced that the major purpose of foreign language study should be a concentration on oral proficiency; that speaking a second language was the ultimate goal. And the focus on oral proficiency and communicative competence in the profession indicates that foreign language professionals agree.

If oral proficiency is a major goal for foreign language learners, it, then, presupposes oral proficiency on the part of the teacher. If the teacher is unable to converse in the language he/she is teaching, instruction tends to remain traditional with emphasis on grammar, translation, vocabulary memorization, and written exercises. Oral proficiency, then, is lost as a goal. It is my contention that prospective foreign language teachers should be taught oral proficiency. The three decades I have spent in working with these teachers has convinced me that they are conscientious about their work and want to do a good job, but are often products themselves of traditional training and lacking in exposure to native speakers, thereby remaining unable to speak the language much less teach their students to speak.

Although initial training of foreign language teachers should concentrate on oral proficiency, if this does not occur, then opportunities should be provided by in-service training that places emphasis on oral skills. With this in mind, a colleague

at the University of Mississippi and I proposed a plan to the Secretary of Education's Discretionary Fund for Improvement and Expansion of Instruction in Critical Foreign Languages.

We received a grant to hold an Institute for Spanish and French teachers in Oral Proficiency and Teaching Effectiveness on campus at Ole Miss. These were practicing secondary teachers from Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas. Although this grant concentrated on both improving speaking skills and methodology, in both Spanish and French, this article will concentrate on the oral proficiency training of the Spanish section.

Two years earlier my colleague had obtained private funding for a small summer program in Intensive Spoken French, and under university support repeated the program the following year adding Spanish. These successful pilots supplied a solid base for the expanded, funded Institute.

These three summer programs used a modified FSI method not because it is the best and only way, but because it affords an efficient, effective structure for controlled practice in speaking large amounts of sequentially structured real language, practiced several hours a day in small classes under the watchful instruction of native speaking tutors trained and supervised by a linguist. Improvement can be rapid if information about grammar, vocabulary and syntax is brought to the class by each participant: thus, it is a matter of releasing all this previously acquired knowledge by teaching native-like pronunciation, intonation, syntax, choice of response, and so on,

along with a great deal of formal and informal contact with native speakers outside the classroom, and in simulated situations within the classroom. All these measures work together to release inhibitions against speaking for fear of making mistakes. Errors are corrected immediately and repetition is required. Many corrections result in much learning, and give the participants confidence that they can use the language at some level in real situations.

This FSI method has one additional advantage over other methods for use with persons who have already studied the language by a reading-based or a grammar/translation method: the encounter the spoken language in other settings, enabling them to maintain and increase their speaking proficiency by eliciting both language information and cultural information from native speakers. Such techniques could also, of course, eventually be used by teachers with their own students. But, the FSI method was used in our Institute because it was the most direct route to the goal of adding the ability to speak the language well and confidently to the other skills the teachers had. Experience in previous Spoken Language Programs at the University of Mississippi showed that as participants increased their confidence and their ability to handle the language, they began to enjoy contact with native speakers and to feel comfortable seeking their company outside the classroom. In an NEH institute for Spanish and Latin American Studies at Mississippi State University in which I taught some years previously, participants reported a strong desire and need for oral competency. They were

afraid to be with native speakers because of their admitted inadequacy in oral skills.

The Program

The spoken language classes of the Institute took place daily (M-F) from 8:30 to 12:30 a.m. for four weeks. Participants were placed in small groups of 2-3 according to a pre-oral interview evaluation conducted by a certified FSI tester from the State Department in Washington, D.C. The participants were taught beginning at their level and going as fast as progress could be made. Allowance was made for movement across levels if and as warranted. The staff consisted of five native speakers from Colombia, Bolivia, and Puerto Rico (three men and two women) trained and supervised by a linguist. (No tutors were available from Spain) The linguist held a Ph.D. in Spanish and had spent a week at FSI being trained further in their techniques. The tutors changed groups every hour and every day so that all participants were exposed to male and female native speakers, and voices from different areas of Latin America. The tutors were trained to teach the language orally and to serve as experts in what is or is not ultimately acceptable, thus making use of all available class time for language instruction. The linguist was available in her office for questions about the phonology, syntax, grammar or any other aspects about the language. Classes included much repetition and practice in the language at both the drill and free conversations levels. Classes included pronunciation, including phonemes and intonation; individual and dialect differences; every day expressions; the asking and

answering of questions; the use of the language to find out information; simulations of situations likely to be encountered; study of syntax, word choice and meanings; and appropriateness of style. FSI texts were used as well as many other materials, both audio and visual. Spanish language films were shown on Monday nights providing opportunities for discussion the following day in classes.

Tutors and participants lunched together every day and spent much out of class time together in informal activities, thus providing more opportunities for natural practice in the use of Spanish. Wednesday nights were scheduled for party time. Games in Spanish, picnics, music, and dancing added opportunities for the natural use of Spanish between participants and tutors. A Spanish graduate student was available at all times during the day to video-tape classes and other activities for viewing and analyzing, and to copy audio tapes on the high-speed duplicator for participants to study and to keep. All participants had been required to bring portable tape recorders with them to the Institute so that they could practice with their tapes at any time. This, we believe, offers an efficient and flexible alternative to the language laboratory, and perhaps an even better method.

The Evaluation

Since the FSI scale is a well known and accepted one and has been available for some time, it seemed reasonable to use it. Employing certified testers from Washington assured us of a credible system for evaluating oral proficiency. In addition,

my colleague had worked for FSI, developing its Lao program, had many contacts there and was familiar with the evaluation. In our way of thinking, the FSI oral proficiency interview would also provide us with possible validation of an existing system.

A native speaker of Spanish from Honduras, a certified oral proficiency evaluator from FSI, came to campus to do the oral interviews before the program began and after the four weeks of intensive Spanish.

The Results

The pre and post-Institute oral proficiency interview/ evaluations administered to all participants were adapted from FSI scales so as to be more appropriate for the teachers/ participants. Ratings on this test are given on a scale of 0 ("no useful command of the language") through 5 ("equal to the proficiency of an educated native speaker") with half-steps indicated by "+". As seen in Table I, all of the Spanish participants (8 women - 2 black and one white male) showed a gain on the test. For students entering with a low rating (0-1+), an increase of one-half to one whole rating could reasonably be predicted by exit time. In the middle range (2-2+), one-half steps could be predicted although it is difficult to make that amount of progress in four weeks. The two participants who improved from 2+ to 3 and from 3 to 3+ showed remarkable progress. These two participants made use of every possible opportunity to speak Spanish with the native speakers and to work with tapes. At the higher levels of proficiency, (3 and above), a measurable improvement is less likely to show up as the tasks

required become markedly more complex and broad as one progresses up the scale. At any level, the fact that a change directly measurable by the scale is not reflected does not mean that no change has occurred; improvement may be from the bottom of the 1 level, for example, to the top of that level.

For diagnostic purposes, the individual raw scores on the language proficiency report pinpoint where improvement has taken place.

TABLE I

Entrance and Exit Ratings in Speaking Proficiency in the Institute for French and Spanish Teachers

Spanish Language Section

Student Number	Entrance Test	Exit Test	Change
1	Ø	1	+
2	1	1+	+
3	Ø	1	+
4	2+	3	+
5	2	2+	+
6	1	1+	+
7	1	1+	+
8	2+	3	+
9	3	3+	+

The five participants entering the program at Ø to 1 all improved, 4 1/2 step and one from Ø to 1. The one participant entering at the upper levels, (3) improved 1/2 step. It is the three participants entering at the levels of 2+ and 3 who all

improved 1/2 step that are the most interesting. This showed that it is possible to improve at these stages in a 4 week intensive program.

Conclusion

The language progress of the participants was impressive. Their improvement in a four-week intensive program proved to us the feasibility and appropriateness of such training for modern language teachers. We believe it is the best way to provide retraining for teachers already in the field. Of course, it would be good if language teachers could receive all their training in this way. High school and college schedules do interfere with this method, but, with some creative thinking and planning, intensive semesters could be arranged for language learning, and FLES programs offering longer sequences would also help. The modified FSI method of small group instruction with native speaking tutors and linguist teams works remarkable well. Progress in the language is rapid, and participants leave with a very positive attitude about their own progress and their relationships with native speakers. The FSI oral proficiency interview proved a valid system for evaluating participants, thus providing us with information about the appropriate use of this scale.

Reference:

Brown, H. Douglas; Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. 2nd edition. Printice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 07632. 1988.

	BLOCKING	DYSFUNCTIONAL	INTRUSIVE	ACCEPTABLE	SUCCESSFUL	SUPERIOR	RAW SCORE
COMPREHENSION	Misunderstandings of very simple language 0-4	Examinee recognizes nonunderstandings which are quite frequent 5-9	Difficulties in comprehension slow down the interaction. 10-14	Exhibits understanding quickly when clarification, repetition or paraphrase is given. 15-19	Understanding is limited by cultural background 20-24	Understanding is essentially complete 25	
DISCOURSE	Unable to produce continuous discourse. 0-4	Minimally elaborate performance 5-9	Performance shows lack of cohesion. 10-14	Discourse is cohesive. 15-19	Discourse is well-organized 20-24	Broad, flexible control of functional rhetorical devices. 25	
STRUCTURE	Structural accuracy is largely random. 0-5	Miscommunication arises frequently due to lack of control of structure 6-11	Inconsistent accuracy in relatively high frequency areas. 12-17	Structural inaccuracy is rarely the major cause of misunderstanding. 18-23	Range and control of the structure is great. 24-29	Structural accuracy and flexibility approach bilingual competence. 30	
LEXICALIZATION	Lexicalization is inaccurate and narrow 0-5	Lexicalization range is narrow and highly unnatural. 6-11	Lexicalization is unusual and/or imprecise. 12-17	Lexicalization is clear and relatively natural. 18-23	Very infrequent imprecision of lexicalization. 24-29	Lexicalization is precise. 30	
FLUENCY	Examinee speaks with difficulty. 0	Fluency is irregular. 1-3	Examinee speaks readily, but not fluently. 4-5	Examinee speaks readily, suitably filling in pauses. 6-8	Performance is fluent. 9	The flow of speech is effortless and smooth. 10	

RAW SCORE TOTAL:

MATERIALS USED:

WARM-UP TOPIC_____ READING(S)_____

INTERVIEW TOPIC_____

BRIEFING PAPER(S)_____

SIGNATURES:_____ _____

Examiner Tester

M/FS/S/LS/LTU:1354A:March 1986

FSI Scale, Dept. of State
Washington, D.C.